

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis C

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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus (a type of germ) that causes liver disease. The hepatitis C virus is found in the blood and liver of people with hepatitis C infection.

How is the hepatitis C virus spread?

The virus is spread primarily through blood. People most at risk are those who have had a blood transfusion or an organ transplant before 1992, or people who use or have used needles contaminated by blood (for example, for the injection of drugs). Since July 1992, the blood supply has been carefully checked for this virus and the blood supply is considered to be safe.

The hepatitis C virus can be spread whenever blood (or fluids containing blood) come in contact with an opening on the skin or other tissues. This can occur even when these openings cannot be seen. Hepatitis C virus can also be transmitted by sexual contact, but this does not happen as easily as the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

The hepatitis C virus is not spread by casual contact like hugging, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food and drinks. You cannot get hepatitis C by donating blood.

How serious is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection can be very serious. Most people who become infected will carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Some of these people will develop liver damage and feel very sick. Other people may feel healthy for many years after being diagnosed with hepatitis C infection. This virus can eventually cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and/or liver cancer in some infected people. While most people will not develop liver failure or cancer with hepatitis C, we cannot tell who will or will not have these problems.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis C?

People are at risk for developing hepatitis C infection if they:

- have used street drugs or shared needles, even just once
- have received a blood transfusion, blood products, or an organ transplant before July 1992
- have had many sexual partners, especially if they did not use condoms
- are health care workers (like doctors or nurses) who may be exposed to blood or needles
- are babies born to mothers who have hepatitis C; or
- have been on kidney dialysis.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

A drug called interferon may sometimes be used to treat hepatitis C infection. It is usually used in combination with other drugs, such as Ribavirin. People diagnosed with hepatitis C infection should not drink any alcohol or take certain medicines that can cause liver damage. It is recommended that persons infected with hepatitis C be vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B, two other viruses which cause liver damage if they are at risk for those infections. Antibiotics (medicine to fight an infection from bacteria) do not work against the hepatitis C virus. Ask your doctor about treatment options and steps you can take to protect your liver.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The best way to keep from getting the hepatitis C virus is to avoid any contact with blood. This includes not sharing needles, razors, or toothbrushes. Blood banks now screen donated blood for hepatitis C virus, so your risk of getting infected from a blood transfusion is extremely low. You can also get hepatitis C from sex with an infected partner; using a condom may reduce your risk of becoming infected.

To prevent the spread of hepatitis C:

- If you shoot drugs, never share works with anyone. Don't share cocaine or other snorting traws, since these can get blood on them too. Find out about treatment programs that can help you stop using drugs.
- Use a latex condom every time you have sex.
- Only get tattoos or body piercings from places using sterile equipment.
- Health care workers and people who clean up in hospitals or places where needles or sharps.
- are used should follow standard (universal) precautions for **every** patient.
- If you have hepatitis C, don't share razors or toothbrushes.
- If you have hepatitis C, don't donate blood, sperm, or organs.

What about other kinds of hepatitis?

There are several different kinds of hepatitis viruses. If you have had one type, you can still get any of the others. The hepatitis A virus is spread by feces (stool) through close personal contact or contaminated food and water. Even a very small or not visible amount of feces can carry this virus. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A infection. The hepatitis B virus is spread through blood and body fluids, like semen. There is also a vaccine to protect you from hepatitis B infection. If you have hepatitis C, ask your doctor about getting vaccinated for hepatitis A and B. Blood tests can be done to see if you have been exposed to the different types of hepatitis viruses.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under "government")
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>
- The Hepatitis Hotline, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), at 1-888-4HEPCDC [1-888-443-7232].